

Summer at Furlongs

Little did we realise in those first few months of 1939, that all our lives would change by autumn and would never be the same again. However, it wasn't war that was to change my life that year – just a series of events that at first, were joyful, then ahead of Europe's collapse, became personal devastation.

Eric and I had been married some nine years and we were enjoying a good life, albeit humble. Both of us had gained a series of commissions and our art was selling well – Eric with his watercolours; me with my wallpaper designs. We had plans to escape London and move to an Essex hamlet called Castle Hedingham; but, for some reason, we still remained drawn to our beloved South Downs and Eastbourne's apron strings kept drawing us back to the south coast.

It was during one of these southern sojourns that we made the acquaintance of Peggy Angus. She was a boisterous Scottish girl who tried desperately to join the rising ranks of the British Communists but accepted her failure by welcoming our friendship in return. I liked Peggy and knowing of our love of all things South Downs, she invited us to her quaint but sparsely furnished cottage, Furlongs, which nestled in the countryside just ten miles west of Eastbourne and under the watchful eye of *The Long Man of Wilmington*.

Eric first visited Peggy in snowy February and soon returned to London with exciting plans for us to spend the summer at Furlongs, whereby he would paint the rural idyll, *Long Man* included, and we could take time to reconsider our relocation to Essex.

Furlongs, you might say, was a Bohemian outpost. Peggy was a wonderful hostess who welcomed all manner of artists and eccentrics, and tea at Furlongs was the highlight of the day when all who had migrated to Furlongs would assemble and recount their productive industry – whether that be painting, sketching, writing, or rambling. Homemade cakes aplenty laid out on red gingham clothed tables, so we rejoiced in Peggy's hospitality under a deep azure summer sky, listening to stories that flowed as freely as the freshly brewed tea.

After tea, we would all rest and then reconvene for an evening meal. One late June day, Peggy cooked a loin of pork, generously donated by a local butcher, and we all sat down at the communal wooden table made from old trestles. It was not uncommon for newcomers to just turn up, and so it was on this evening that Helen Binyon arrived – a friend of Peggy's from way back when. Helen was the daughter of a famous poet, Laurence Binyon, and had inherited both her father's talent for writing and his good looks. She was also a skilled watercolourist.

Eric instantly fell in love with Helen. Their affair, far from discreet, started almost immediately and they would go off painting together, leaving me to contemplate.

It was at that moment of being annexed, I realised I was pregnant.